

# Biographical Material on the Life R. L. (Pat) Kilpatrick



Pat Kilpatrick, as he is commonly called among his many friends, is one of the great leaders within the Restoration Movement initiated by the Campbells and Stone. He is one of the great defenders of Christian unity for which Jesus prayed. I first met Kilpatrick in Bethany West Virginia. I attended a lecture program in which a number of outstanding speakers appeared on the program, and Pat was present for this great gathering of spiritual leaders.

## BRIEF FAMILY HISTORY

Richard (Pat) L. Kilpatrick was born on 14 March 1927 in Greenfield, Ala. His father, Robert F. Kilpatrick, was born in 1891 in Tennessee. His mother, Lorena Roden, was born in 1890 in Alabama and died in 1963. His father preached for thirty-five years and established seventeen congregations, mostly in north Alabama.

Kilpatrick received his education from the school of "Hard Knocks," so he tells me. This, he says, qualifies him for several degrees. He did manage to complete two years of college credits with Southern Mississippi University. Also, he was a technical writer for Redstone Arsenal for a number of years. He published his first journal (*Ensign Fair*) in 1973, which is still published as of September 1999.

## EARLY CHURCH WORK ON ISLAND OF GUAM

Kilpatrick was never a "full-time" preacher, but, in a number of churches, he often filled in until the congregation could locate a full-time preacher. For example, one such church was on the island of Guam; this congregation was a military congregation with no located preacher. Since the church had no paid minister, the male members took their turn in preaching and teaching. While stationed on Guam, one of the worst typhoons ever to strike land (over 210 mph winds) in the Pacific destroyed the church building. For the next several months, the congregation worshipped in a tent. This brought the church closer

together than anything else that could have happened.

## **KILPATRICK'S RETURN TO THE STATES**

After Kilpatrick returned to the States, he worshipped with the Rodenberg Church of Christ in Biloxi, Mississippi, where he began a work with the black brethren and established the Nixon Street Church of Christ. Following his retirement from the Air Force, he returned home and began another career with the Army Civil Service, Redstone Arsenal, Huntsville, Alabama. During this period of employment, he began to work with local churches in preaching and teaching. He worked with a number of congregations: (1) Huntsville [West Huntsville Church of Christ], (2) Ardmore, Tennessee, (3) Madison, Alabama, (4) New Hope, Alabama, and (5) Greenfield, Alabama [his home congregation and where he was baptized].

## **DESCRIPTION OF R. L. KILPATRICK'S MINISTRY**

### **Publication of Ensign Fair**

Beginning in May 1973, while worshipping with the Farley congregation in south Huntsville, Ala., Richard Kilpatrick began publication of a journal to provide communication between sister congregations. At that time, there were fifty congregations (Churches of Christ) in Madison County, but there was neither cooperation nor communication among them. The congregations were not working together; it was as if each congregation was in its own world, apart from all other Christians. He envisioned the congregations working together to exhibit greater powers and force for the cause of Christ. In order to alert the various congregations to their practice of isolationism, he wrote an article, "I've Got A Secret," to chide the congregations for not revealing to other sister congregations their activities. In other words, the various congregations never revealed their secrets, that is to say, what they were doing or planning to do in their Christian ministries.

### **Banishment from Farley Church of Christ**

After three years, the Farley congregation banished him, along with the Ensign, the name of his journal. Up to that time, he had experienced a good relationship with the congregation.<sup>[1]</sup> But several legalistic brethren infiltrated, from the Lincoln congregation, the Farley church. These brethren from Lincoln had just been kicked out of that congregation. Kilpatrick says that the Lincoln congregation "had been split so many times they had very little left to split." This legalistic group now provided the majority. Thus, as a result of this influx of members, the new members were able to gain control and oust Kilpatrick and his journal.

Kilpatrick says that there were vague charges made against his articles in the Ensign. One such allegation centered on the means of justification, by law or faith. In a letter to this author, Kilpatrick writes:

There were vague charges made about the teachings of the magazine. The main charge seems to have been a statement I made in one article, to wit: "When Paul said that we are not justified by law, he meant ANY law." "There you have it,"

they said, “You said we don’t live under any law.” I pointed out that what I said was that we are not **JUSTIFIED** by any law.[\[2\]](#)

Kilpatrick looks back on the events that occurred as a blessing from God. He says, “Looking back on it I am convinced that God was behind it all because I was somewhat curtailed in what I wrote in the magazine in reference to 'law and grace' for I knew the effect it would have on our legalistic brethren in the congregation.”[\[3\]](#) Since the congregation financed the monthly journal, he felt a certain amount of loyalty to them. He told this author that God set him free from the shackles of bondage so that he could write what he perceived to be the truth and what the church really needed to hear. How did God accomplish this feat? God accomplished this freedom through the castigation of Kilpatrick by the church. Yes, the congregation excommunicated him.

He says that this was probably the lowest point in his spiritual life. He kept asking God why He was doing this to him. About this same time of spiritual depression, he received a letter from Carl Ketcherside, editor of Mission Messenger, encouraging him “to be proud to be kicked out of the Farley church rather than having to gnaw my leg off to escape!”[\[4\]](#) As a result of this letter, Kilpatrick reflected upon the situation; and he was convinced that this was God’s strategy for his ministry for the advancement of God’s kingdom on earth.

### **Prayer for Understanding**

Before these catastrophic events, as he perceived them at the time, occurred, he prayed that God would help him to understand the book of Romans. Kilpatrick told this author that God answered his prayers. But when he began to share his understanding of justification by faith with other believers, he felt the sting of opposition. As a result of this hostility, he added an appendix to his prayer: “Lord, give me the courage to preach what I understand.”[\[5\]](#)

### **Imputed Righteousness.**

Kilpatrick says that he is not sure when he began to understand “imputed righteousness,” but this insight became solidified in his thinking through the study of Anders Nygren’s commentary on Romans. He says that he wrote a three part series on “imputed righteousness” in May, June, and July 1975 issues of *Ensign Fair*. In the June 1976 issue of *Ensign Fair*, he wrote an article entitled “The Gates of Paradise” to relate the experiences of Martin Luther to his own struggles. He has been editor of *Ensign* for approximately twenty-six years; this ministry has been the major focus of his service in the Lord’s kingdom. Kilpatrick is well known for his labors toward unity among Christians of all denominations, especially among the Churches of Christ.

## **KILPATRICK’S VIEW OF LEADERSHIP**

### **Pastoral/Leadership**

Within the Churches of Christ, the so-called pastor system that is acceptable among many denominations is not a viable option or practice, or so it is argued. Even though Churches of Christ do hire pulpit ministers, nevertheless, they still do not occupy the same position

of authority as some clergy do in other denominations. Within the Churches of Christ, the controversy of power revolves around the so-called “authority” of the elders, not the authority of the clergy.[\[6\]](#) Today, within the Churches of Christ, elders function more in the capacity of a board of directors. To disagree with many elders is the same as disagreeing with God. They often do not make a distinction between their hand-me-down interpretations of God’s Word and the Word itself.

Kilpatrick does not object to a congregation supporting someone to do full-time work, that is to say, one’s total financial livelihood from the church. But the person so hired should not exercise authority over the congregation. Neither does Kilpatrick renounce appointment of elders to shepherd the flock, but he does repudiate the “authority” philosophy assumed by many elders. He asserts that elders are to teach and to encourage individuals to live pure lives. His view on leadership within the Churches of Christ is one of the most controversial issues facing the Churches of Christ today.

Kilpatrick vigorously presents reasons why Christians cannot allow a group of men to exercise authority over them. He advocates the priesthood of all believers, not just a select few. In his editorial for *The Ensign Fair* in 1978, he set forth views that shocked the denominational Church of Christ. In this article, he postulates three reasons why elders cannot be “rulers” of the church. First, he says correctly,

He who rules a nation is the “head” of that nation. He who rules the church is the “head” of the church. If elders rule a congregation, then the elders are the “head” of the congregation. If all congregations were consolidated into one body, then the elders would become the head of the combined body. Since all congregations do, in fact, constitute the one body of Christ (Eph. 4:4)), then the elders are the “head” of the church of Christ on earth! This has to mean that Jesus was mistaken when he said that God had given him “ALL authority in heaven AND ON EARTH” (Mat. 28:18), since the elders rule “on earth.” However, we prefer to believe Jesus.[\[7\]](#)

Second, he explains, “If elders have ‘official authority’ to rule the church, then it follows that members are under divine orders to ‘obey’ their rulers.”[\[8\]](#) If Christians are under orders to obey elders, then, Kilpatrick reasons, the elders will have to answer to God on behalf of the church members, since members are to obey their rulers. Again, he writes: “Are members under the authority of Christ in one instance and under the authority of elders in another?”[\[9\]](#)

In August 1986, Kilpatrick wrote a powerful essay refuting the hierarchical structure adopted by many Churches of Christ.[\[10\]](#) He explains the desire for power in this way:

Since the beginning of time man has had the lust for power and authority. It entered into the nature of man with the advent of sin. It is a gift of Satan, a work of the flesh, and belongs in the category of “pride.” It does something for man’s pride to be able to give the orders. He loves the praise and prestige and the feeling of importance. He will scheme and connive, he will lie, cheat, and even murder to gain control. That’s the way the world has always been and it will never be any different.[\[11\]](#)

Once more, Kilpatrick captures this concept of authority as he recalls Jesus' startling conversation about his disciples' vision of domination in the coming kingdom. "When you talk about a kingdom and king, and law and subjects," writes Kilpatrick, "someone has to be at the top, do they not?"<sup>[12]</sup> Again, in order to focus upon the place of absolutism within the kingdom of heaven, Kilpatrick analyzes the dialogue between Jesus and his apostles. In this exchange, Jesus calls attention to a revolutionary concept, not power mentality, but servant comprehension. Matthew records the following account:

But Jesus called them to Himself and said, "You know that the rulers (αρχοντες, *archontes*) of the Gentiles lord it over (κατακυριευουσιν *katakurieuousin*) them, and *their* great men exercise authority over (κατεξουσιάζουσιν *katexousiazousin*) them. It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."<sup>[13]</sup>

Kilpatrick correctly points out: "It was a difficult thing for the disciples to grasp."<sup>[14]</sup> Again, he aptly stresses the shock that the apostles experienced in this revolutionary concept of greatness; Kilpatrick also makes the following succinct observation: "How revolutionary! Whoever heard of a kingdom in which the lowly servant would be the greatest! How can the last be 'first' and how can slaves have such prominence?"<sup>[15]</sup> His assessment of the contemporary situation is full of insight. Here is what he says:

It seems that for awhile the point was understood in the first century, but with the passage of time and the natural lust for power coupled with the difficulty of understanding the point, the church soon had its rulers, just like the Gentiles; first its plurality of bishops over the congregation, then the emergence of a chief Bishop, the chief bishop over several congregations. Eventually a Bishop over all churches in a province, and finally a Super Bishop, the Pope.<sup>[16]</sup>

Kilpatrick looks at the KJV and its translators to determine the philosophy behind the translation to determine its impact upon the Christian community in its concept of leadership and authority. He concludes that King James viewed the church in the same way that one might view a kingdom. He says, "The church, in the mind of the king, and in the minds of some of our people, was synonymous with 'kingdom,' an 'institution' that was worldwide in scope."<sup>[17]</sup> In other words, the king saw no distinction between church and state. Thus, he considered himself to be the head of the church as well as the head of the state; they were one and the same.<sup>[18]</sup>

Many Christians often interpret the term elder not to denote older men, but as a noun to describe an office or rank. It is a popular error, writes Kilpatrick, to employ "the use of the word 'elder' and 'elders' . . . as a noun, whereas in the Greek it is an adjective."<sup>[19]</sup> He further states that the word elder "is a descriptive word, denoting age."<sup>[20]</sup> He cites Paul's words to Timothy as an example of the proper use of the word elder. For example, Paul writes: "Rebuke not an elder (Πρεσβυτεῖρῳ *presbuterw*), but entreat *him* as a father; *and* the younger men as brethren;"<sup>[21]</sup> Then, Kilpatrick writes, "The RSV has the correct rendition of it, 'Do not rebuke an older man (*presbuteros*) but exhort him as you would a father.'"<sup>[22]</sup> Once more, to illustrate the adjective function of this word, he calls attention to verse two: "The elder women (πρεσβυτεῖρᾶ *presbuteras*)

as mothers; the younger as sisters, with all purity.” [23] He also reasons that if the word ‘elder’ in verse 17 has reference “to a ruling class of brethren, then it must surely have the same meaning in verse 1 (and the same for ‘women’ in verse 2). [24]

Kilpatrick writes that “We can search the scriptures through and through and we will not discover an ‘officer’ in the church. There is no office of elder, or bishop, or anything else in the sense in which these words are now understood.” [25] Again, he says, “*Bishop* is a functional word and refers to a ‘work’ rather than a person.” [26] His view of ministry is that there are no offices or officers within the kingdom, only functions.

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[1] The Farley church of Christ, 12112 S. Memorial Parkway, Huntsville, Ala. 35803, originally sponsored this paper. See R. L. Kilpatrick, ed., *The Ensign Fair*, 1, no. 1 (May 1973): 2.

[2] R. L. (Pat) Kilpatrick, “Written Especially for Dallas Burdette Who Really Knows How to Make It Hard on a Person,” written at the request of an interview by Dallas Burdette, 28 April 1997, Huntsville, Ala.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Kilpatrick, “Written Especially for Dallas Burdette,” 3.

[6] This question of authority on the part of preachers in Churches of Christ is only partly true; some preachers do execute terrifying power. Also, editor-bishops exercise great power to keep the people under control in doctrinal matters. Within the Churches of Christ, each major faction publishes its own party journal. This journal becomes the rallying point around which orthodoxy is determined. For one to disagree with some editor, then, generally, this is tantamount to disagreeing with God Himself.

[7] R. L. Kilpatrick, “Three More Reasons Why Elders Cannot Be ‘rulers’ of the Lord’s Church,” in *The Ensign Fair* 6 no. 5 (September 1978): 2.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] R.L. Kilpatrick, “The Continuing Influence of King James,” in *Ensign* XV no 7 (August 1986), 122f.

[11] Ibid. 122.

[12] Ibid.

[13] *The New American Standard Bible, 1995 Update*, (La Habra, California: The Lockman Foundation) 1996.

- [14] Kilpatrick, “The Continuing Influence of King James,” 122.
- [15] Ibid. 122.
- [16] Ibid.
- [17] Ibid. 136.
- [18] Ibid.
- [19] Ibid. 138.
- [20] Ibid.
- [21] First Timothy 5: 1, *The King James Version*, (Cambridge: Cambridge) 1769
- [22] Kilpatrick, “The Continuing Influence of King James,” 138.
- [23] First Timothy 5:2, *The King James Version*.
- [24] Kilpatrick, “The Continuing Influence of King James,” 139.
- [25] Ibid.
- [26] Ibid. Kilpatrick’s analysis is full of insight; it is well worth reading in its entirety.